

VU Research Portal

Advancing careers through 'merit'

Peréz , Andrés; Sabelis, I.H.J.

published in

Culture & Organization
2020

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723)

document version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

document license

Article 25fa Dutch Copyright Act

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Peréz , A., & Sabelis, I. H. J. (2020). Advancing careers through 'merit': A rationalized-sensemaking narrative in hierarchical organizations. *Culture & Organization*, 26(4), 315-332.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723>

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

E-mail address:

vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl



Advancing careers through 'merit': a rationalized-sensemaking narrative in hierarchical organizations

Andrés Pérez & Ida Sabelis

To cite this article: Andrés Pérez & Ida Sabelis (2020) Advancing careers through 'merit': a rationalized-sensemaking narrative in hierarchical organizations, Culture and Organization, 26:4, 315-332, DOI: [10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759551.2019.1601723>



Published online: 02 Apr 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 239





View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Advancing careers through ‘merit’: a rationalized-sensemaking narrative in hierarchical organizations

Andrés Pérez ^a and Ida Sabelis ^b

^aFacultad de Comunicación y Diseño, Universidad ORT, Montevideo, Uruguay; ^bFaculty of Social Sciences, Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This contribution provides an in-context exploration of how middle-managers make sense of their career progress, and particularly focuses on ‘merit’ to understand how careers are driven in a hierarchical organization. The study exposes ‘merit’ as a fragmented and individualized construction that links back to the participants’ broader life ambitions and identity footprint. It also shows a tendency for maintaining trust in ‘merit’ above other circumstantial and opportunity factors, even in face of events which undermine the application of the merit-based principle. ‘Merit’ is hence portrayed to be a rationalized narrative in careers’ trajectory; a marker used by participants to make sense of events in a coherent manner, consequently experiencing self-efficacy and reducing uncertainty. The findings add complexity to the ‘meritocracy’ debate, calling for new critiques which address its underlying inequality dimension while also contemplating the individual psychological purpose driving ‘merit’ beliefs.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 17 March 2018
Accepted 26 March 2019

KEYWORDS

Merit; meritocracy; linearity; self-continuity; career trajectory; narrative

Research into careers has occasionally focused on providing alternative paradigms and metaphors to that of linearity, showing that the traditional view of professional development which emphasized notions of stability, hierarchy, and clearly defined positions and progression plans is transitioning to a ‘boundary-less’ (DeFilippi and Arthur 1994) career landscape characterized by ‘multidirectional career paths’ (Baruch 2004), a growing tendency to search for a ‘path with a heart’ (Hall 1996), and a renewed definition of the ‘successful worker’ marked by the capacity to adapt to rapidly changing environments (Baruch 2004; Hall 1996). Specifically in gender studies, scholars have demanded non-linear alternatives to the dominant discourse of linearity (see, for example: ‘Kaleidoscopic careers’, Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; ‘Frayed careers’, Sabelis 2010; ‘Care, career and patchwork’, Halrynjo 2009), challenging the image of the successful worker as ‘climbing the ladder (fast)’. Despite these efforts, recent literature has also shown that time and space remain paramount to the way in which western societies think of careers, underlying managerial texts, educational systems, and organizational designs (Loacker and Śliwa 2018). The linearity preference, and the underlying assumption of promotability through merit, continues to dominate the ways in which careers are framed, with ‘high’ and ‘fast’ symbolizing success (Bailyn 1989; Buzzanell and Goldzwig 1991; Chua 2011). In this context, albeit in transition, the present paper focuses on the notion of merit-based advancement as a central reference point to explore whether, why and how individuals subscribe to the upward mobility paradigm during their career progress in the context of a hierarchical and traditional American multinational firm. By exploring how participants in our case study invoke,

construct, and sustain (or challenge) what for them constitutes 'merit' while narrating their careers' trajectory, we aim to advance knowledge on how careers are driven and identities delineated in today's organizational setting.

In the socio-psychological literature on careers, the topic of 'merit' has been approached by attending to its discursive-power dimension, unravelling it as a hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing narrative. From such a point of departure, critics portray how 'merit' appears to be ill-defined and self-evident, a measure to which we would all subscribe without the need to articulate or investigate what it actually encapsulates, acting as bias for dominant group members (De Vries 2017; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002). While the social inequality dimension underlying the meritocracy ideal has largely been discussed, scholars have not reconciled this work with the notion that our beliefs serve an individual psychological purpose. We contribute to the debate by, first, exploring whether participants embrace, or discredit, the ideal of upward mobility through 'merit'; second, by paying specific attention to how 'merit' is defined and constructed in each case; third, by analysing how the preference for 'merit' is brought upon and defended (or challenged) by participants; and, finally by linking this back to the linearity/non-linearity debate, the psychosocial tradition and identity literature. Therewith the contribution sets the ground for furthering 'merit' as career sensemaking marker, claiming that a true critique of 'merit' needs to consider both its (social) inequality consequences and the (individual) psychological drive behind 'merit' beliefs. In times when career settings are reconfigured under conditions of increased acceleration, fragmentation and uncertainty (Adam 1995; Bauman 2000; Harvey 1990; Leccardi 2005; Nowotny 1994; Sennett 1998; Zoll 1988), criticizing 'merit' without bringing alternative career advancement systems may jeopardize individuals' capacity to experience a sense of control and predictability over career outcomes.

Hierarchical models, linear careers and 'merit'

Traditional career models are strongly associated with bureaucracy, hierarchy, control, and external definitions of success (Hall 1976; Kanter 1989; Van Maanen and Barley 1984). The concept of intra-organizational mobility developed at the turn of the twentieth century (Bailyn 1989; Driver 1982; Leach and Chakiris 1988), alongside notions of upward and linear career movements within hierarchies, having become so entrenched in popular, managerial and scholarly thought that it is difficult to imagine a world without these conceptualizations (Buzzanell and Goldzwig 1991). In traditional career views, success is tightly associated with time, space and the notion of process, involving orientations towards 'future' and 'height' (Buzzanell and Goldzwig 1991; Derr and Laurent 1989) illustrated in metaphors such as 'climbing up the ladder fast' (Caple 1983).

Hierarchy and rational-bureaucratic models, by definition, operate through the development of rational incremental systems of reward and promotion allocation, supposedly free of bias and connoting fairness. The emergence of the concept of 'meritocracy' —merit-based selection and advancement— can be traced back to theories of industrialism associated with Parsons and Bales (1956), Kerr et al. (1960), Bell (1973), Blau and Duncan (1967), and Weber's rational-legal model (1947/1964), and responds to the demand of modern industrial societies to allocate high-level and functionally important occupational positions based on merit (Jackson 2007). The belief in advancement through merit with a concomitant preference for linearity have become social constructions, constituted in social interaction and communication (Berger and Luckmann 1966), which operate together, dominate career research, metaphors, paradigms and ideologies in Western Societies since the 1950s (Buzzanell and Goldzwig 1991).

In the last couple of decades, scholars have engaged with both the notion of linearity and meritocratic systems from a critical perspective, unravelling the power of discourse favouring dominant groups. Around the linearity debate, efforts have focused on providing alternative paradigms and metaphors which account for new societal conditions. Gender and feminist scholars have spearheaded these efforts, concerned with coining new metaphors which are sensitive to women 'cycles' or 'rhythms', and how they balance their career ambitions with other aspects of their lives

such as maternity (see, for example: Halrynjo 2009; Mainiero and Sullivan 2005; Sabelis 2010; Sabelis and Schilling 2013; Schilling 2012). Career scholars have followed (see, for example: Baruch 2004; DeFilippi and Arthur 1994; Hall 1996), aiming to account for contemporary values, greater flexibility, challenge and personal life-style (Beer et al. 1985; Yankelovich 1979; Zemke 1987).

The concept of 'merit', at the same time, has broadly been approached by exposing its inequality dimension (see, for example: Bourdieu 1986; Veblen 1953; Weber 1968; and closer in time: Castilla and Bernard 2010; De Vries 2017; DiTomaso 2015; Scully 2002; Sliwa and Johansson 2014; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002; Van den Brink and Benschop 2011). From the psychosocial tradition specifically, authors have argued that meritocracy is presented as a desirable enabler of progress achieved through societal and organizational ranks, masking inequalities under a view of fair and free competition (DiTomaso 2015; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002) which legitimizes a hierarchical society (McCoy and Major 2007; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002). Following the 'System Justification Theory' (Jost and Hunyady 2005), authors have posed that people are motivated to see the world as fair and predictable to reduce the threats of uncertainty, thus embrace ideologies that legitimize the current system (Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004) and can lead to support the status quo (Jost et al. 2003). From a 'Social Dominance' perspective (Sidanius and Pratto 1999), meritocracy is theorized to act as a hierarchy-enhancing legitimizing myth which helps maintain a disproportionate 'positive social value' between dominant groups and subordinate groups (Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin 2006). And, lastly, from the 'Belief in a Just World' tradition (Lerner 1980), the belief in deservingness through 'merit' is presented as one of many expressions which individuals subscribe to for coping with reality (Rubin and Peplau 1975; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002).

While in the last few decades multiple voices have approached the subject of 'merit' and linearity from a critical perspective, no focus has been put in reconciling this work with the notion that our beliefs in 'merit' and preference for linearity serve an individual psychological purpose therefore cannot be easily discarded or replaced. While some theories acknowledge the psychological drive behind our 'merit' beliefs, this is not explicitly contemplated in the critique neither explored in depth. We attempt to fill in this gap through three guiding questions:

- (A) In a hierarchical-traditional organization such as in our case study, is merit-based advancement the dominant conception (still)?
- (B) How is 'merit' defined by each participant and what nuances can be found across definitions and uses?
- (C) How is the notion of merit-based advancement protected and maintained in light of 'unfair' events?

In such a quest, we offer a contribution to the linear/non-linear career debate by providing additional in-context testimonies in favour or against the upward mobility paradigm and preference for 'merit', and later dialogue with the psychosocial tradition and identity literature when looking at the testimonies from a fragmented perspective and attempting an interpretation of how the preference for 'merit' as career driver links back to the participants' life values and sense of identity. Concomitantly, we reconcile the critical view with the attitudinal exploration of our 'merit' beliefs, claiming that the original critique to linearity and 'merit' is incomplete unless it is sensitive to the psychological drive behind said beliefs.

Methodology

The study was carried out in the Uruguayan branch (70+ employees) of an American multinational company operating in the US' Mortgage and Real Estate industry. For the effect of the investigation, the decision of selecting the company was taken for two reasons: firstly, due to the necessity of bounding participants to a single organizational reality that would enable a more effective 'in context' interpretation (Cronbach 1975; Thomas-Gregory 2014). Secondly, because of proximity,

resources and availability to access the organization as the first author worked in the company for four years (2011–2015), two of which he performed a middle management role. And thirdly, because of the hierarchical structure presented in the organizational design, where multiple levels can be found (namely: coordinator, analyst, sr. analyst, floor lead, team lead, assistant manager, manager, sr. manager, director, VP, sr. VP, chief positions).

The circumstance of the first author having worked for the organization for a period of time converted the research into an ‘at home’ ethnography (Alvesson 2009), facilitating a big deal of the contextual analysis and expediting the process of getting accustomed to the company’s culture. On the positive side, going back to a place where one of the authors spent a few years as an employee allowed for faster rapport with the participants and, at times, greater openness throughout the interviewing process. On the downside, the proximity to the object of study entailed a risk of bias which had to be closely monitored by relying strictly on the field data and on the second author’s observations, consciously fighting against the temptation of inferring insights from the first author’s previous experience and preconceptions.

Specifically, 15 participants were selected for the study (Bryar 1999; Hammersley, Gomm, and Foster 2000; Stake 2005; Thomas-Gregory 2014). In order to broadly cover the areas of interest, middle-managers falling within various categories and under different circumstances were selected. Roles included managers, assistant managers, team leaders, floor leaders and senior analyst positions. Out of the 15 selected participants, 5 were women and 10 were men –corresponding to the difference in representation in middle-management positions that existed within the company at that time. In terms of age, participants ranged between 22 and 47 years old. With regard to their level of studies, backgrounds went from public education and incomplete tertiary studies, to Master’s students from private schools. In what refers to their background within the company, participants presented variations in terms of seniority in their roles. In relation to personal situations, the sample presented differences in marital statuses, sexual orientation, and in whether participants had children or not. Finally, in terms of nationality and origin, 13 participants were Uruguayan, 1 from Venezuela, 1 from Argentina, and 4 of them had lived abroad for a fairly long period of time –either in the US, Canada or Europe (Table 1).

Data were obtained through a qualitative approach that entailed the application of responsive in-depth probing and questioning, designed to account for the participants’ individual experiences and context (Arthur and Nazroo 2003; Rubin and Rubin 1995). A number of topical points were identified as key for the study and then covered consistently with all participants in one-on-one interviews of one hour, organized throughout a period of three weeks.

The first few questions were designed to gather contextual information from the participants. Then, topical points were organized under four semi-structured sections (Table 2):

Section 1 entailed asking participants to freely narrate their career trajectory and particularly explain how they thought they made their way up to the position in which they found themselves. As such, this section also served as priming mechanism on the topic of career progress, ‘merit’ and upward mobility. Participants who did not convincingly elaborate on what ‘merit’ is about by naming factors and skillsets when referring back to their personal stories, were then asked additional and more direct questions to ensure the priming process was completed in all cases.

Section 2 involved facing participants with the chance of reflecting upon other factors that could have affected their career’s trajectory –besides personal ‘merit’—, such as circumstances, opportunity, or networks. This second section was particularly applied to those participants who did not naturally mention circumstantial factors when addressing questions in section 1, and served as the basis to research how participants weight the ‘merit’ factor against circumstantial ones.

Section 3 entailed inviting participants to think of their career future and narrate where they thought they would be in one, five and ten years from now, in addition to explaining which factors would be key for taking them there. Together, topical points under section 1, 2 and 3, were designed to address research questions A¹ and B.²

Table 1. Participants' socio-demographic data.

Name	Age	Sex	Position	Additional data
Agustin	23	Male	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children * Studying to obtain a Bachelors Degree in Economy in a private school
David	27	Male	Team Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship. No children * Degree in Multimedia Design (Instituto Europeo de Diseño, Barcelona). * Bachelors in Sound Production (Barcelona). * Has lived in Europe most of his life, born in Bolivia.
Giancarlo	24	Male	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship. No children * Currently studying a bachelors in Business Administration (private school) * Throughout his life he lived in South Africa, Canada and Uruguay * In the company since January 2013
Valentina	29	Female	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Married. Two children. * No university degree completed (only a course in Marketing). * Lived for almost 10 years in the US. * In the company since June 2011.
Nicolas	26	Male	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children. * Incomplete tertiary studies. * In the company since November 2012.
Andres	26	Male	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship. No children. * Currently studying a bachelors in Law (private school)
Andrea	26	Female	Senior Analyst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship. No children * Was born and raised in Venezuela * Bachelor in Communications (Florida State University, US). Currently studying a Masters in Managerial Information Systems (Illinois University)
Federico	28	Male	Team Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship. No children. * Bachelor in Economy (private school). MBA (UCAM) * In the company since June 2010
Laura	41	Female	Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Married. Two children. * Incomplete tertiary studies. * In the company since November 2008
Leila	27	Female	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children. * Incomplete tertiary studies. * Moved from partner company in September 2014
Maximiliano	27	Male	Floor Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children. * Incomplete tertiary studies. * In the company since December 2013.
Silvana	47	Female	Floor Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Not married. In a relationship (living together). No children. * No tertiary studies completed. * Story of immigration: born in Argentina, lived in Canada and Uruguay. * Homosexual orientation. * In the company since February 2009.
Gonzalo	34	Male	Assistant Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. With a daughter. * Bachelors Degree in Business Administration (Ottawa, Canada) * In the company since March 2012.
Julian	30	Male	Senior Analyst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children * Business Administration (incomplete) in Canada * In the company since April 2012
Fernando	27	Male	Senior Analyst	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Single. No children * Studying to obtain a Bachelors Degree in International Business (private school) * In the company since June 2013

Table 2. Questionnaire's topical points.

Topical points and sample questions		Aims and Scope
Section 1	Narrate your career trajectory – natural elaboration around merit How did the transition to your current position happen? How did you experience it? To what factors would you attribute the promotions you have been through?	Is merit the preferred measure for explaining career advancement? How is merit defined by each participant?
Section 2	Other factors besides merit (circumstances, opportunity, networks) Were there any other factors involved in your trajectory, besides personal merit? What percentage weight would you attribute to those factors? You spoke about good times, were there any bad times in your trajectory? Caused by which factors?	How are other factors weighted in comparison to merit? Do participants tend to refer back to merit every time?
Section 3	Career projection – forward looking How do you see yourself in one year from now? What about in 5 years? What factors will be decisive to taking you there? Image you would be offered the chance to become CEO of a company like this one. Would you take up the challenge? Why and how?	Is upward mobility a taken for granted conception? Are there alternative career paths to that of linearity? Is upward mobility sustained on merit-based ideals?
Section 4	Fairness in perspective – backward looking If all your bosses had been fair with your performance, where would you be today? Did you experience any unfair situations in your career? To what factors would you attribute those events you experienced? If you could change something looking back at your career, what would it be and why?	Is there an abandonment of the trust and preference for merit? How are stories narrated to protect merit? How do we arrange our looks when faced with 'unfair' events?

While Section 4, lastly, was tailored towards exploring research question C.³ Participants, through three guiding topics, were requested to look back at their careers and evaluate their progress in light of their own measure of fairness. First, by answering the question of whether they thought to be in the position they deserved based on their understanding of what 'merit' means. Second, by asking themselves whether they would change anything they did in the past, in connection to their careers. And third, by requesting participants to explain what went wrong when the outcome of events did not go as expected.

From there, stories were tabulated following both a concept-driven and data-driven approach (Gibbs 2007), and then systematically analysed by establishing patterns of similitude, differentiation and connectedness while drawing on a narrative analysis. Drawing on such approach entails understanding how the constructions and values emerge from the participants' speech and paying specific attention to how the plots unfold within the text of 'merit' (Grant et al. 2004).

Particularly, testimonies were analysed together to identify patterns while addressing the research questions. First, testimonies were collated against each other to analyse whether participants resort to 'merit' as career advancement measure when narrating their trajectories, how is 'merit' defined by each of them, and how it is presented alongside other career advancement factors. Second, testimonies were compared to identify patterns of connectedness between how 'merit' is defined and how participants think of their lives in the broader sense. During this iteration, nuanced and alternative versions of the upward mobility paradigm came up and were explored. For such purpose, testimonies were especially analysed in connection to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics. Third and last, stories were compared to identify generalizable sensemaking-arrangement techniques participants resort to when faced with events that undermine the measure of 'merit'. As a result of the patterns of similitude observed between narratives, testimonies were arranged under three categories of our own making, as we present them on the findings section.

'My career, my own doing': trajectory based on merit (among other things ...)

What would you say are the keys to success if you had to explain to others how you made it to where you are? One seems to naturally narrate a story marked by opportunity – most likely, yet to different extents – and personal merit – most certainly and above everything else. Advancing our careers through 'merit' is so entrenched in our beliefs that coming across stories which overlook the merit factor is rather rare, especially in hierarchical organizations where the distribution of rewards is formally organized in levels. Participants who took part in the present study were no exception. Let us look at some of the testimonies to illustrate this point.

Andres, when looking back at his trajectory refers to his first promotion and explains: 'I think my performance has been good. I never received major complaints or negative feedback. And I personally think I have done a good work'. An explicit mention to performance and good work which transpires personal merit, yet is propped by opportunity:

I do think I was, so to say, 'lucky' because of the moment in which I joined the company. It was a two people's team, so, logically, there were many growth opportunities. If I did my work well, new people who were joining would naturally come underneath me.

David, similarly although in an inverted order, when talking about his personal story, mentions:

Look, for me it was all gradual. When I joined the company, I realized I was very lucky to be in a team that is much more dynamic than the average team in our company. It is a team where we can carve our own way.

A good deal of opportunity, which then turns into: 'They were already delegating a lot to me and – they said – I was doing very well with handling that volume of work. All of that was adding to my chances of being promoted'. And finally closes along the lines of 'merit': 'I feel the promotion was something like ... maybe not mandatory, but a natural step in the process'.

In Valentina's words: 'As it happens to most people, if your performance is good and you demonstrate commitment and ownership in what you do, you start getting chances of progressing' – a version of 'merit' which comes up spontaneously on the basis of performance and commitment, and lands on the shores of promotion.

In Silvana's:

With my experience in the company, and my age as well, the team started to see me as a reference point for questions and training. At that point Valentina told me that she was thinking on opening this new position, and asked me if I was interested in taking it

– a promotion infused with the notion of process and a well-deserved end.

And in Laura's: 'There was a very delicate event by which all the Managers resigned and left the company. That is when the promotion opportunity came up'. A promotion which arises alongside opportunity; an opportunity that she took on her own 'merit':

At that time, the person who was my manager was already giving me some new responsibilities, but you could say that they were mostly honorary responsibilities. He gave me the chance to become an overseer of the whole team, but without any formal position, and I was growing in my role.

As interviews kept progressing and new testimonies were recorded, it became clear that all participants would somehow bring the personal merit factor to the fore of their storytelling, be it that they moderately or clearly emphasized the role of circumstances and opportunity. It was apparent that, when narrating their career trajectory, the milestone of promotion was naturally experienced as advancement and seen as a desired career path which also acts as an external sign of success within the organization.

In Nicolas' testimony, for example, advancing his career clearly touches upon his drive for promotion, and this also ties back to his preference for 'merit' as an objective measure which can be captured on numeric goals: 'After one year of having achieved the numbers, month after month, I asked Laura to see if there was a chance, within Sourcing or outside Sourcing, of growing'.

In Giancarlo's story, the preference for growing within the hierarchy and advancing on the basis of 'merit' becomes explicit when making sense of two important events. A first one marked by frustration because of not promoting: 'I remember I applied and it didn't happen: they chose another person. [...] I wasn't happy with the decision'. And a second one, marked by success thanks to having the opportunity to prove his value:

Right after, I decided to move. And that gave me a bit of fresh air. I even felt in the new team I could better apply the skills I possess. That took me to get a promotion to Floor Lead.

Lastly, in Federico's, the intertwining of promotion and 'merit' is presented even when he acknowledges that opportunity played a part: 'If they would not have resigned I would not have been promoted, but it also was because of merit, of my performance and productivity'.

'Merit' and 'views of life': constructions that go hand in hand

'Merit', therefore, is a must when narrating careers' trajectories, at least for those who took part in this study. But, what does 'merit' mean? If we follow Jackson (2007), 'merit' could be understood as meaning one of two things: first, a set of formal qualifications that an individual has achieved – outward demonstrations of inner capacities and skills (Bell 1973; Parsons 1954; Parsons and Bales 1956); or, second, as in Young (1958), where 'merit' is seen not as achievement but rather as a measure, or marker of the specific inner capacities of individuals —through this approach, intelligence plus effort make up for 'merit'; a measure that educational qualifications are often taken to provide (see also Chua 2011). In those both definitions, 'merit' is presented as an objective measure of success, backward-looking and, most of all, bias-free. However, does this claim hold true? How do participants position themselves in face of the seemingly objective measure of success? How do they define what 'merit' is about? And, most importantly, do they all think of 'merit' along the same lines?

According to David, the most important ability for having a successful career is 'taking ownership'. As he explains it: 'the projects that come our way, more or less, manage the whole thing by being proactive, having a vision of the future, and taking the project as an opportunity to exceed expectations'.

In Valentinás view, the decisive factor for anyone to be promoted could be summarized on 'how reliable you are, how committed you are, if you always come to work, if you are constant'.

For Giancarlo, it all comes down to 'good communication skills, the capacity to absorb change, and a positive type of ambition'.

And for Agustín, it is a matter of 'the way in which you report results', 'not being afraid of giving updates to senior-management positions, knowing how to handle complicated situations', and 'working on your relationship with executive-level positions'.

As participants talked about 'merit' they seemed to do so in individualistic terms, not only by emphasizing different skills but also by weighting attributes differently. While David, for example, values attributes such as 'proactiveness', 'taking ownership', having 'a vision of the future', Giancarlo talks about a 'positive type of ambition', 'communication skills' and the 'capacity to adapt', Agustín refers to 'reporting results', 'relationship management with executive-level positions' and what we could call 'courage and determination', and Valentina talks of 'reliability', 'commitment' and 'constancy'.

In fact, as the interviews progressed, it became apparent that every participant while narrating their story would resort to their own idea of 'merit' and in each argument 'merit' would come up differently. Silvana, for example, believes 'knowledge and experience go hand in hand' and drive 'merit'. Laura, argues 'trust and reliability are very important', same as your 'alignment with your manager'. Nicolas thinks 'ambition, wanting more, proving that you can get more, do more', 'having a strong personality so as to be able to manage many problems', and 'also being very number oriented and results oriented' are key. For Gonzalo, 'your English is very important, and

the analytical part as well', in addition to 'knowing how to negotiate', your 'passion for work', 'wanting to learn the whole time', and 'acknowledging something when you make a mistake'. And for Leila, 'merit' entails 'processing information very fast' and 'managing relationships effectively'.

Testimonies thus seemed to point at varied ideas. While some participants stressed the 'aggressive ambition' front, others did so with the 'reliability and constancy' one, or the 'adapt to change' side, or else the 'passion for work' one. 'Merit' didn't seem that much commonly agreed upon; quite the contrary. Driven by this initial finding, the next question we formulated came to be: where do such nuances originate? How do these fragmented constructions of 'merit' connect back to the participants' sense of identity, ambition and chances in terms of their working lives?

When looking at the constructions of 'merit' in the light of the participants' life stories, a rooted connection between how 'merit' is framed and how participants think of life in the broader sense—their life ambitions, desired work-life balance, career preferences, and interests ('view of life')—seemed to emerge. Let us look at Agustin's case, for example. Following his career talk, 'delivering high-quality work with attention to details', a 'good level of English', being skilful in 'reporting results to upper management', knowing how to 'handle complex situations', and 'maintaining good relationships with executive-level positions' are salient constituents of 'merit'. Non-coincidentally it seems, when talking about his present work-life ambitions, he stresses his will for climbing up the ladder fast and achieving the 'American Dream' as soon as possible. In the way in which he frames his career ambitions, there seem to be no time to 'mature' within the workplace as performance must be solid and 'fearless' when showcased to upper management:

I would say that for the next 8 years of my life I would work 12 h if necessary. I'm quite materialistic, my main goal is related to work and money. And the age to do that is now, when you are growing and objectives are reached faster. I have the 'American Dream': I want the house, the car, I want it all. But for having all of that you need to work, work hard, and it has to be now. I don't want to have money when I turn 60. I want it fast.

'Knowing how to handle complex situations', 'maintaining good relationships with executive-level positions', and 'being skilful in reporting results' seem tightly coupled with 'wanting to climb up the ladder fast'. In fact, his definition of 'merit' seems to align with what he considers fair means to fulfil his ambitions, and acts as a justification of said means. If you are to climb up the ladder fast, he seems to sustain, you better impress those in high-level positions, and you better be fearless when taking up new challenges.

The same symbolic connection between 'merit' and a 'view of life' can be traced back in Giancarlo's and Valentinás narratives. In Giancarlo's case, his life story explicitly touches upon his construction of 'merit' as he acknowledges how his capacity to absorb change became a salient component of his skillset:

I would say that my ability to adapt to change and new things, thanks to what I have lived so far. I got used to those changes and I can, as a result, succeed when there are changes coming. I usually rise up and overcome changes without problems. I think that many people are not so open to those changes, and because of that they limit themselves and how far they can reach.

'Overcoming changes' is a marker in his biography and 'absorbing change' is a measure of success in his storytelling. Again, like Agustin, he coherently articulates his 'view of life' – how he has lived, more than what he hopes to accomplish— with his definition of 'merit'. If you are to succeed in this world, he seems to argue, you are to be willing to positively deal with changes.

In Valentinás case, a connection emerges in the intertwining of her work-life-balance reconciliation and 'merit' construction. While she emphasizes skills such as 'reliability', 'availability', 'commitment' and 'consistency' as salient components of 'merit', when talking about her present life story, she stresses 'stability' as what matters most. When explaining how she projects herself in the next five years of her life, she portrays how closely 'merit' and her 'view of life' are linked:

I'll begin with my personal life that it's easier. In that sense, I am a very stable person. I like stability. I've been 14 years with the same person, I like having a stable couple. I like the security that comes together with forming a family. What we have built with my husband is my life, I'm very attached to it. I see myself with my daughters, with

my husband, at home. In the same house or in a different one, but I aim to protect and maintain the family atmosphere until the end of my days.

'Reliability' and 'commitment' seem tightly coupled with 'stability'. Similar to the two previous cases, Valentina's 'view of life' coherently articulates with what she considers meritorious at work. By defining 'merit' in line with her career ambitions, she seems to protect her hopes for life and experiences a sense of control over outcomes. Family atmosphere is the key – a largely explored gender characteristic—, she seems to believe. If you are to succeed in an organization, surrounding yourself with familiar, trustworthy, committed people is what counts.

'In merit we trust, no matter what': sensemaking-arrangement techniques

'Merit' is thus presented as the preferred career driver, one that runs alongside the preference for upward mobility and marks success within the organizational setting. It also emerges as a fragmented construction that feeds-back and coherently articulates with the participants' 'view of life', acting as an organizing factor, a storytelling marker or fixed-base driver that helps tie events together when narrating a career trajectory, justify career movements and plan next steps. But, what happens when participants are faced with events where the measure of 'merit' is undermined?

When looking at the stories together, a tendency for never abandoning the preference for 'merit' as main career driver became clear. Even in the light of events which confronted their 'merit' constructions, participants would arrange their view of events to fill in the 'merit' gap and somehow preserve their trust in the principle.

In Nicolas' story, for example, this particular behaviour emerges in the belief that 'merit' sooner or later will prevail:

Let me tell you something. Throughout my life, in the work I used to have, I always received what I deserved. Here, now I started receiving what I deserve. That is: now I feel I am where I deserve to be.

Behind his acknowledgement of 'now I started receiving what I deserve' lies a mechanism by which he chooses to focus on the presently perceived fit between his 'merit' construction and reality interpretation, while somehow ignoring the time in which he experienced a gap between these two – inferred in the 'now I have'.

In Andrea's case, the non-abandoning of 'merit' comes up in her choice for working hard despite coming across numerous frustrations, trusting that in the end she will get what she deserves:

I never stopped myself to question the system. I feel that people who give the best of themselves are noted, sooner or later. People who are mediocre will never be noted. I choose to think that my management is waiting for me to complete this learning process, become a key player and then formalize my promotion. For that, I need to keep on working hard and looking forward.

In her 'not stopping to question the system' and 'focusing on working hard' lies a mechanism for preserving the trust in merit-based advancement as well. As connoted in her 'people who give their best are noted, sooner or later', she pushes herself to keep going despite frustrations, believing that recognition and fairness will come eventually.

Whereas in Giancarlo's case, such tendency emerges in the seemingly conscious choice for believing everything happens for a reason, minimizing or ignoring failures and instead focusing on his hopes for the future:

I remember I applied and it didn't happen: they chose another person. At that time I really couldn't understand much about why they didn't choose me. I wasn't happy with the decision, but I decided that the best path to follow was to continue working hard with positive energy and attitude. I like to think that everything happens for a reason. The idea was to keep on working hard hoping that another opportunity would come up soon.

In his 'I decided that the best path was to continue working hard', there is a conscious choice for not fixating on the event where things went badly, and instead believing 'everything happens for a reason' and trusting 'new opportunities will come up'.

When analysing this shared tendency for non-abandoning 'merit' as preferred career driver closely, attempting to find patterns of similitude and differentiation across testimonies, a set of arrangement techniques emerged to which participants would resort for maintaining their trust in 'merit'. First, a tendency for emphasizing the role of 'circumstances' in the light of a particular event that went wrong. Second, blaming the failure and/or non-application of the principle on personal weaknesses that had been overlooked when the event took place. And third, attributing the failure of 'merit' to a deficient interpretation and/or application of the principle done by others. Such arrangement techniques would sometimes be invoked separately by participants – in different fractions of their text or when explaining more than one event in their career's trajectory—, while other times in combination.

With regards to the first arrangement technique, it seemed as if the notion of 'fairness' would always come up as interplay between the personal 'merit' construction and the role of 'circumstances'⁴ in the participants' stories. When making sense of reality through the lens of 'merit', participants seemed to evaluate how well events fit their 'merit' construction and, based on such interpretation, assess whether the outcome should be judged as 'fair' or 'unfair'. Whenever such outcome easily fits their 'merit' construction, the circumstantial factor tended to be maintained in a secondary role. However, when the outcome confronted with their view of 'merit', participants tended to bring the role of 'circumstances' to centre stage in their storytelling.

Let us look at Leila's case, for example. When looking back at her career, she resorts to the company as a 'circumstance' that has marked and will continue to define her positioning:

This is a company where you are just a number. Through history, this company has never cared for employees. I work a lot with the global HR Department, with people in high-level positions, and truly, no one really cares about people resigning. You might have a different experience with your manager at a local level, but in this company it feels as if no one cares. I work by a different culture. I believe your employees, especially the entry levels, need to be happy and focused. That makes a difference in the performance of the company from bottom up. Therefore, since I have a different way of working, I sometimes get confronted with that culture. In many ways, this is a huge company built over plastic legs.

The company, in her story, is portrayed as a factor that undermines the correct application of 'merit' and cannot be easily changed nor overcome. In her 'I work by a different culture' and 'I sometimes get confronted with that culture', we can infer she funnels the blame of her career stagnation on the company's culture; a circumstance that could be changed in case she managed to switch companies.

Federico, similarly, draws on the company to explain some of the frustrations he has been put through in his career. When talking about an event where the main task of his team was removed from his command and transferred to another Business Unit, he resorts to the company in the following words:

It was changing because of a matter of circumstances, what is quite normal in these multinational companies I believe. I couldn't do anything, really. What I used to like the most about my job was the tasks and responsibilities, but the decision came from above. So there was nothing I could do. I think that not even my boss could have done something, in case he would have wanted to.

In his testimony, the company's culture, inferred in his 'what is quite normal in these multinational companies', acts as blocker of 'merit'. Later, when stating 'not even my boss could have done something', he elevates the 'company' even more to a central role in his storytelling. Same as Leila, Federico seems to preserve the illusion that in a different place, under different circumstances, 'merit' can and will eventually prevail.

With regards to the second arrangement technique, a tendency was observed towards filling in the 'merit' gap with a reinterpretation of their capacities when looking back in time. Some seemed to relate their frustrations at work, and the delay in formal promotions, to personal flaws in performance, poor knowledge, wrong decisions they made, or lack of formal qualifications they overlooked when an episode took place.

Let us look at Andrea's case, for example. When trying to explain her current *in-transition* situation, she attributes the postponement of her formal promotion to not having a clear career path or strategy to grow within the company, something she believes to be changing now:

Yes, I do see myself capable of getting new responsibilities, but at the same time I didn't have a clear path towards promotion. So I kind of saw myself as someone who can start taking on new things and creating her own space. [...] I think I have proved myself that I am very efficient. So, yes, now my strategy is to become that super-agent, that key player that can handle many things.

Despite having worked hard and given her best for a few years now, she abstains from judging her delay in promotion as unfair and rather chooses to focus on 'not having a clear path' for explaining it. Following the way in which she frames events, the one who failed to 'find a path towards promotion' is her, and the duty to do more is on her.

Julian, similarly, explains the delay of his promotion on not having a medium-term vision. To the question of whether he would blame the apparent stagnation of his career on his own decisions, he explains:

Yes, yes, obviously. I totally assume that. If I would have stayed in, for example, field vendor management, it would be different now. My promotion would have come already, or otherwise I would have searched for something else. But having changed to a new department has held me back, and my promotion has lasted longer.

Like Andrea, he refrains from judging the situation as unfair despite his frustration. He rather chooses to blame his stagnation on 'a poor decision he made'. By arranging his view of events in such way, 'merit' as career driver is preserved, and what's left for him is to go back, improve his decision-making, and try harder next time. Both for Andrea and Julian, putting their focus on their own weaknesses seems to imply that if they manage to master the skills they are missing, they will be able to advance their careers. Meanwhile, 'merit' as principle remains flawless and unquestioned.

With regards to the third and last arrangement technique, we observed a tendency among a group of participants for arranging the interpretation of a particular event by blaming the failure of 'merit' on the deficient application of the principle done by others. In such cases, 'merit', while recognized to fail, remains unquestioned as the blame is projected on those 'others' who fail to apply or interpret the principle instead of on the meritocratic system itself.

Laura, for example, recognizes many unfair situations are happening around her, and argues these occur because of the unwillingness of others to apply the measure of 'merit' responsibly:

It still happens to me now ... that thing of looking to your side and thinking that it is really unfair. There are cases now of people that I know are about to be promoted to the position I am in, and I think it is really unfair. I defend a meritocratic principle, and I believe that the performance of certain people does not match the position and the opportunities they have.

I think it has to do with very cumbersome processes up top, full of bureaucracy. Many times what happens is that people who are high up in the hierarchy are not willing to buy a problem for themselves, they are not willing to make the effort, and even less if it represents a bit of a risk.

In her testimony, the meritocratic principle is something to be defended; a rational way of advancing careers one needs to subscribe to and responsibly apply. As she sees it, not following the principle is a matter of personal choice. Therefore, if the system fails and unfair situations occur, then those are to be blamed on how others operate. With the right group of people —she seems to believe— the meritocratic principle would prevail.

In Julian's story, a similar mechanism is applied when sustaining that the organizational system is built following a rational design and arguing the only reason why 'merit' fails is because of how others interpret the system:

You need to understand how the system works, and once you do so, everything goes well. It is a system that is well designed. But those who make the system go wrong are people. And that is why people come and go: because of not understanding the system and how it works.

In this way, it is not unwillingness to apply 'merit' for what makes the principle go wrong, but rather the incapacity of others to accurately interpret the system. There are no 'unfair' situations happening, simply people inaccurately making sense of events. When stating 'you need to understand how the system works' he conveys a conviction for understanding the system, as opposed to those others

who might not do so. Such conviction seems to allay his anxiety and provide him with a sense of control over outcomes. While others might fail to interpret the principle and the outcome of events in the right way and that is why they get frustrated, he seems to sustain, 'merit' as career advancement measure works in a rational way, and 'I understand how it works'.

Fernando's testimony, as corollary, summarizes how the three arrangement techniques operate, illustrating how they can be invoked together to fill in the 'merit' gap and put down a fight against the difficulty to control outcomes:

I've been waiting to grow for 1 year now, since I applied to an IJP, and things have been delayed because of bureaucratic matters, then because they didn't allow major changes. My manager is a very particular person. Sometimes I took things personally, many times I asked myself 'why not me?' I see the rest being promoted, why am I being delayed? Is it me? Is it my work? Is it my English? I consider I do a very good job. I have my gaps and my weaknesses, particularly in the negotiation, as it is in English, but ...

First, he blames the delay of his promotion on the company as a 'circumstance', when pointing at 'bureaucratic matters' and the fact of 'not allowing major changes'. Then, in his 'my manager is a very particular person', he suggests the failure of 'merit' could be due to the incapacity of 'others' to apply the principle, or interpret his performance fairly. And finally, in his 'Is it me? Is it my work? Is it my English?' he questions his skills, looks deeply into his weaknesses, even when he believes to be doing a good job. At no time during the iteration he abandons the preference for 'merit' as career driver, neither acknowledges the chaotic nature of how 'merit' is applied. Instead, he chooses to arrange his view and hold on to 'merit' as a fixed-base driver.

Discussion and conclusions

This case study of 15 middle managers in the Uruguayan branch of an American multinational, through the exploration of research question A, portrays how, within hierarchical organizations, 'merit' is resorted to as the main factor when narrating career trajectory. Participants, when looking back at their careers and explaining how they made it to where they currently are, include personal merit in their testimonies, regardless of other circumstances. This finding is not surprising, as it coincides with traditional concepts in psychosocial literature. Following the 'Belief in a Just World' framework (Lerner 1980; Rotter 1966) there is motivational significance behind believing that the world is a just place (in fairness, meritocratic rewards). It brings a sense of personal efficacy and an ability to manipulate one's own environment to bring just rewards, like an increased locus of control (Long and Lerner 1974; Mischel 1974). Also, it supports linearity literature, which sustains that, especially within hierarchical organizations, time and space remain paramount to how we think of career progress, reaching 'high' and 'fast' symbolizing success (Bailyn 1989; Buzzanell and Goldzwig 1991; Chua 2011). In effect, resorting to 'merit' as career driver supports the ideal of upward mobility within hierarchies and the underlying notion of advancing careers through a 'bias-free' method of reward distribution.

While ideals of advancement based on 'merit' resulting in an upward trend seem to be deeply entrenched within hierarchical organizations, the findings of our study signal that career conceptions and the definition of 'merit' are fragmented, and thus vary in terms of rhythm, expectations and expressions. As an answer to research question B, the uses of 'merit', when narrated by interviewees, present nuances which seem to connect back to larger life values, and hence with positioning in terms of age and gender. While some participants emphasize attributes such as having a fearless attitude, chasing the opportunity, and not hesitating when taking on new responsibilities, others value capacities such as commitment, trustworthiness, and loyalty. Coherently, those in the first group tend to have an ambition for a vertical and effervescent career, whereas those in the latter show a preference for stability and preserving their current work-life-balance reconciliation, yet not completely abandon the wish for 'growing' within the hierarchy and the preference for 'merit' as career driver. These characteristics seem loosely coupled with age (the younger, the more 'fearless' and 'individualized') and gender. The latter can be concluded from the fact that relatively more female voices report

the importance of work-life-balance by mentioning 'stages' of career, or even refraining from the strive for 'promotion' (compare Acker 2006; Sabelis and Schilling 2013). At the same time, it also coincides with Schwartz theory of values (2012), particularly with the assessment that the way in which we prioritize our values serves as criterion for the evaluation of events. Following Schwartz (2012), values are universal, yet the way in which we prioritize values changes from person to person, in the face of new events and through the course of time. The findings of the study, similarly, suggest that the way in which participants define 'merit', and hence evaluate performance, is somehow universal, although presents nuances that relate to how they prioritize and deal with their larger vistas for life and ambitions. While all participants seem to agree that, for example, 'commitment', 'relationship management', 'achieving department's goals', 'embracing change', are constituents of 'merit', testimonies indicate they prioritize these skills differently.

Through the study of research question 3, testimonies additionally show participants not only subscribe to 'merit' as the main driving force of their careers, they do so even when the outcome of events undermines the merit-based principle. In fact, their trust in 'merit' is hardly ever challenged and never abandoned. Participants tend to isolate those events that because of their outcome would come to contradict their 'merit' constructions and arrange their stories so as to fill in the 'merit' gap. They do this by resorting to three main techniques: elevating the role of 'circumstances' in the explanation of the outcome of the event; blaming the failure of the 'meritocratic' principle on personal weaknesses (personal failure, or the need to do more) that had been overlooked when the episode took place; and/or attributing the failure of the principle to the deficient application of the measure of 'merit' done by others. Such a pattern of sensemaking, once again, is not surprising, considering it coincides with the sociopsychology tradition which poses that our belief in fairness is rooted in educational and socialization processes, responds to the need of seeing the world as organized and predictable to reduce the threats of uncertainty (Jost and Hunyady 2005), pushes individuals to embrace the current system and unconsciously legitimize a hierarchical society and support the status quo (Jost et al. 2003; Jost, Banaji, and Nosek 2004). It concurs, also, with the widespread assumption that narrative identity can be equated with a 'subjective sense of self-continuity' (Czarniawska 1997; Ezzy 1998; Paquette 2013) and an intrinsic desire to sense and experience coherence (Weick 1995) that prevents anxiety while supporting and increasing self-esteem (Brown and Starkey 2000). The connection between 'merit' and 'views of life', on the one hand, seems to bring coherence across the various facets of the participants' life (personal and professional spheres), while trust in 'merit' brings on self-continuity by connecting subsequent career episodes in a coherent manner. Making sense of events through the lens of 'merit' and filling-in its gaps so that the stories coherently articulate, seems to allow individuals think of their careers' past, present and future as (at least partially) controlled episodes, ruled by seemingly objective measures of advancement, therefore bringing a sense of self-efficacy and consequently allaying anxiety. Indirectly, by protecting the trust in 'merit' even in face of events which undermine fairness, participants feed the linearity paradigm, enhance hierarchy, leave unfair situations unclaimed, and help maintain hierarchical disproportions between dominant groups and subordinate ones (Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin 2006).

Together, these findings support a more general criticism: claiming that behind a universal definition of 'merit' inequalities are masked under a view of fair and free competition (DiTomaso 2015; Son Hing, Bobocel, and Zanna 2002). What would 'merit' encapsulate? How would we prioritize skills? Who would such prioritization favour? How do we account for disadvantages that are given into a definition of 'merit'? It does, however, trigger a different reflection as well; contributing to the 'meritocracy' debate by complicating its critique further. First, it shows that the construction of 'merit' is identity-bound and relates to our values. As such, the measure of 'merit' – in essence social and subjected to multiple cultural and political influences (Van den Brink and Benschop 2011) – is nuanced, therefore can never be defined in a static or unproblematic way as it always needs to be contrasted with fragmented and subjective interpretations when in action. Second, the findings suggest our beliefs in 'merit' and preference for upward mobility serve also a psychological purpose. Participants subscribe to it as a rationalized narrative in their career's trajectory to make

sense of events in a coherent and seemingly predictable manner. Consequently, the belief in 'merit' cannot easily be discarded or replaced. Especially nowadays, in times when acceleration, fragmentation, endless career choices and uncertainty set the pulse (Adam 1995; Bauman 2000; Harvey 1990; Leccardi 2005; Nowotny 1994; Sennett 1998; Zoll 1988), eliminating the trust in 'merit' without bringing alternative paradigms could open a dangerous sensemaking gap in the strive for success in young generations.

Similar to the linearity debate, the quandary lying in front of us seems to be: if not meritocracy, then what? Even if we acknowledge the inequality dimension, are we ready to let go of the 'meritocracy' ideal? How will we organize alternative reward distribution systems that are sensitive to individual differences, nuanced understandings of 'merit', and (given) social disparities? How will we call these new systems and under which metaphors shall we represent them? In the various and nuanced interpretations of what 'merit' entails, in the fragmented way of prioritizing skills, exist opportunities for career scholars to think of inclusive alternatives that can help build more equal workplaces accompanying efforts from a gender perspective (compare Halrynjo 2009; Sabelis 2010; Styhre et al. 2018). Success not necessarily needs to be equated with climbing up the ladder fast (see Baruch 2004; Hall 1996; Nørholm Just 2011), same as merit should not be a static, given, universally-defined measure. The challenge is that whatever alternatives scholars bring in should help individuals perceive the world as more-or-less predictable and controllable to resist uncertainty and the pressing issue of organizational anxiety (Pullen and Rhodes 2018). How would a more inclusive definition of 'merit' look like? Discussion must continue.

Notes

1. RQ.A: In a hierarchical-traditional organization such as the one of the case study, is merit-based advancement the dominant conception (still)?
2. RQ.B: How is 'merit' defined by each participant and what nuances can be found across definitions?
3. RQ.C: How is the notion of merit-based advancement protected and maintained in light of unfair events?
4. To the scope of the present study, 'circumstances' account for diverse environmental or contextual factors that go beyond the person's control: it could be the company's economic situation, the company's culture, or broader factors such as labour market conditions.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

ORCID

Andrés Pérez  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6797-3822>

Ida Sabelis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0109-0127>

References

- Acker, J. 2006. "Inequality Regimes." *Gender & Society* 20: 441–464.
- Adam, B. 1995. *Timewatch. The Social Analysis of Time*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Alvesson, M. 2009. "At-home Ethnography: Struggling with Closeness and Closure." In *Organizational Ethnography: Studying the Complexities of Everyday Life*, edited by S. Ybema, D. Yanow, W. Wels, and F. Kamsteeg, 156–166. London: Sage.
- Arthur, S., and J. Nazroo. 2003. "Designing Fieldwork Strategies and Materials." In *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, edited by J. Ritchie, and J. Lewis, 109–137. London: Sage.
- Bailyn, L. 1989. "Understanding Individual Experience at Work: Some Thoughts on the Early Years of Organizational Careers." In *Work, Family and the Career: New Frontiers in Theory and Research*, edited by C. B. Derr, 94–105. New York: Praeger.
- Baruch, Y. 2004. "Transforming Careers: From Linear to Multidirectional Career Paths." *Career Development International* 9 (1): 58–73.

- Bauman, Z. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beer, M., B. Spector, P. R. Lawrence, D. Q. Mills, and R. Walton. 1985. "Managing Human Assets. Part 1: A General Manager's Perspective." *Personnel Administrator* 30: 60–69.
- Bell, D. 1973. *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting*. London: Heinemann.
- Berger, P., and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor.
- Blau, P. M., and O. D. Duncan. 1967. *The American Occupational Structure*. New York: Wiley.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson, 241–258. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Brown, A. D., and K. Starkey. 2000. "Organizational Identity and Learning: A Psychodynamic Perspective." *Academy of Management Review* 25 (1): 102–120.
- Bryar, R. 1999. "An Examination of Case Study Research." *Nurse Researcher* 7 (2): 61–78.
- Buzzanell, P. M., and S. R. Goldzwig. 1991. "Linear and Nonlinear Career Models." *Management Communication Quarterly* 4 (4): 466–505.
- Caple, J. 1983. *Career-Cycles: A Guidebook to Success in the Passages and Challenges of Your Work Life*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Castilla, E. J., and S. Bernard. 2010. *The Paradox of Meritocracy in Organizations*. New York: Administrative Science Quarterly.
- Chua, V. 2011. "Social Networks and Labour Market Outcomes in a Meritocracy." *Social Networks* 33 (1): 1–11.
- Cronbach, L. 1975. "Beyond the Two Disciplines of Scientific Psychology." *American Psychologist* 30 (2): 116–127.
- Czarniawska, B. 1997. *Narrating the Organization: Dramas of Institutional Identity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- DeFilippi, R., and M. Arthur. 1994. "The Boundaryless Career: A Competency-Based Perspective." *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 15: 307–324.
- Derr, C. B., and A. Laurent. 1989. "The Internal and External Career: A Theoretical and Cross-Cultural Perspective." In *Handbook of Career Theory*, edited by M. B. Arthur, D. T. Hall, and B. S. Lawrence, 454–471. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- De Vries, J. 2017. "We Need to Interrogate Merit." *Jendevries Blog*, August 3. Accessed August 20, 2017. <http://www.jendevries.com/blog/2017/7/3/we-need-to-interrogate-merit>.
- DiTomaso, N. 2015. "Racism and Discrimination Versus Advantage and Favoritism: Bias for Versus Bias Against." *Research in Organizational Behavior* 35: 57–77.
- Driver, M. J. 1982. "Career Concepts: New Approach to Career Research." In *Career Issues in Human Resource Management*, edited by R. Kats, 23–32. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ezzy, D. 1998. "Theorizing Narrative Identity: Symbolic Interactionism and Hermeneutics." *The Sociological Quarterly* 39: 239–252.
- Gibbs, G. R. 2007. *Analysing Qualitative Data*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Grant, D., C. Hardy, C. Osrick, and L. Putnam. 2004. "Introduction: Organizational Discourse: Exploring the Field." In *The Sage Handbook of Organizational Discourse*, edited by D. Grant, C. Hardy, C. Osrick, and L. Putnam, 1–36. London: Sage.
- Hall, D. T. 1976. *Careers in Organizations*. California: Goodyear.
- Hall, D. T. 1996. "Protean Careers of the 21st Century." *Academy of Management Executive* 10 (4): 8–16.
- Halrynjo, S. 2009. "Men's Work–Life Conflict: Career, Care and Self-Realization: Patterns of Privileges and Dilemmas." *Gender, Work & Organization* 16 (1): 98–125.
- Hammersley, M., R. Gomm, and P. Foster. 2000. "Case Study and Generalization." In *Case Study Method: Key Issues, Key Texts*, edited by M. Hammersley, R. Gomm, and P. Foster, 98–115. London: Sage.
- Harvey, D. 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jackson, M. 2007. "How Far Merit Selection? Social Stratification and the Labour Market." *The British Journal of Sociology* 58 (3): 367–390.
- Jost, J. T., M. R. Banaji, and B. A. Nosek. 2004. "A Decade of System Justification Theory: Accumulated Evidence of Conscious and Unconscious Bolstering of the Status Quo." *Political Psychology* 25: 881–919.
- Jost, J. T., and O. Hunyady. 2005. "Antecedents and Consequences of System-Justifying Ideologies." *Sage: Current Directions in Psychological Science* 14 (5): 260–265.
- Jost, J. T., B. W. Pelham, O. Sheldon, and B. Sullivan. 2003. "Social Inequality and the Reduction of Ideological Dissonance on Behalf of the System: Evidence of Enhanced System Justification among the Disadvantaged." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 33: 13–36.
- Kanter, R. M. 1989. "Careers and the Wealth of Nations: A Macro-Perspective on the Structure and Implications of Career Forms." In *Handbook of Career Theory*, edited by M. B. Arthur, D. T. Hall, and B. S. Lawrence, 506–521. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kerr, C., J. T. Dunlop, F. H. Harbison, and C. A. Myers. 1960. *Industrialism and Industrial Man: The Problems of Labor and Management in Economic Growth*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Leach, J. L., and L. J. Chakiris. 1988. "The Future of Jobs, Work, and Careers." *Training & Development* 42: 48–54.
- Leccardi, C. 2005. "Facing Uncertainty." *YOUNG* 13 (2): 123–146.

- Lerner, M. J. 1980. "The Belief in a Just World." In *The Belief in a Just World. Perspectives in Social Psychology*, 9–30. Boston, MA: Springer https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4899-0448-5_2.
- Loacker, B., and M. Sliwa. 2018. "Beyond Bureaucracy and Entrepreneurialism: Examining the Multiple Discursive Codes Informing the Work, Careers and Subjectivities of Management Graduates." *Culture and Organization* 24 (5): 426–450. doi:10.1080/14759551.2016.1167691.
- Long, G. T., and M. J. Lerner. 1974. "Deserving, the 'Personal Contract', and Altruistic Behavior by Children." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 29: 551–556.
- Mainiero, L., and S. E. Sullivan. 2005. "Kaleidoscope Careers: an Alternative Explanation for the Opt-out Revolution." *The Academy of Management Executive* 19 (1): 106–125.
- McCoy, S. K., and B. Major. 2007. "Priming Meritocracy and the Psychological Justification of Inequality." *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43: 341–351.
- Mischel, W. 1974. "Processes in Delay of Gratification." In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. Vol. 7, edited by L. Berkowitz, 249–292. New York: Academic Press.
- Nørholm Just, S. 2011. "'I Wasn't Originally a Banker, but ...' – Bridging Individual Experiences and Organizational Expectations in Accounts of 'Alternative Career Paths'." *Culture and Organization* 17 (3): 213–229. doi:10.1080/14759551.2011.569386.
- Nowotny, H. 1994. *Time: The Modern and Postmodern Experience*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Paquette, J. 2013. "Storytelling, Organizations, and the Coherent Self: The Chronotope of Childhood in Professional Life Histories." *Culture and Organization* 19 (2): 146–161. doi:10.1080/14759551.2011.644672.
- Parsons, T. 1954. *Essays in Sociological Theory*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Parsons, T., and R. F. Bales. 1956. *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*. London: Routledge & Paul.
- Pratto, F., J. Sidanius, and S. Levin. 2006. "Social Dominance Theory and the Dynamics of Intergroup Relations: Taking Stock and Looking Forward." *Taylor & Francis Group: Psychology Press* 17: 271–320.
- Pullen, A., and C. Rhodes. 2018. "Anxiety and Organization." *Culture and Organization* 24 (2): 95–99. doi:10.1080/14759551.2017.1412576.
- Rotter, J. B. 1966. "Generalized Expectancies for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement." *Psychological Monographs* 80 (1): 1–28. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0092976>.
- Rubin, Z., and L. A. Peplau. 1975. "Who Believes in a Just World?" *Journal of Social Issues* 31 (3): 65–89.
- Rubin, H. J., and I. S. Rubin. 1995. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sabelis, I. 2010. "Career Cultures: Rhythms of Work From a Gender Perspective." In *Geschlecht und Innovation. Gender Mainstreaming im Techno-Wissenschaftsbetrieb*, edited by W. Ernst, 201–218. Berlin/Munster: LIT Verlag.
- Sabelis, I., and E. Schilling. 2013. "Frayed Careers: Exploring Rhythms of Working Lives." *Gender, Work and Organization* 20 (2): 127–132.
- Schilling, E. 2012. "Non-Linear Careers: Desirability and Coping." *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 31 (8): 725–740.
- Schwartz, S. H. 2012. "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values." *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>.
- Scully, M. A. 2002. "Confronting Errors in the Meritocracy." *Organization* 9 (3): 396–401.
- Sennett, R. 1998. *The Corrosion of Character*. New York: Norton.
- Sidanius, J., and F. Pratto. 1999. *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Sliwa, M., and M. Johansson. 2014. "The Discourse of Meritocracy Contested/Reproduced: Foreign Women Academics in UK Business Schools." *Organization* 21 (6): 821–843.
- Son Hing, L. S., D. R. Bobocel, and M. P. Zanna. 2002. "Meritocracy and Opposition to Affirmative Action: Making Concessions in the Face of Discrimination." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83: 493–509.
- Stake, R. 2005. "Case Studies." In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, edited by N. Denzin, and Y. Lincoln, 443–466. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Styhre, A., B. Remneland-Wikhamn, A. Szczepanska, and J. Ljungberg. 2018. "Masculine Domination and Gender Subtexts: The Role of Female Professionals in the Renewal of the Swedish Video Game Industry." *Culture and Organization* 24 (3): 244–261. doi:10.1080/14759551.2015.1131689.
- Thomas-Gregory, A. 2014. "Professional Identities of Middle Managers." *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 42 (5): 620–639.
- Van den Brink, M., and Y. Benschop. 2011. "Gender Practices in the Construction of Academic Excellence: Sheep with Five Legs." *Organization* 19 (4): 1–18.
- Van Maanen, J., and S. R. Barley. 1984. "Occupational Communities: Culture and Control in Organizations." In *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 6, edited by B. Staw, and L. L. Cummings, 287–365. Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Veblen, T. 1953. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Modern Library.
- Weber, M. 1947/1964. *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Glencoe, IL: Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1947).
- Weber, M. 1968. *Economy and Society*. Translated and edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Weick, K. E. 1995. *Sensemaking in Organizations*. London: Sage.

Yankelovich, D. 1979. "Who Gets Ahead in America." *Psychology Today* 28-34: 40-43-90-91.

Young, M. D. 1958. *The Rise of the Meritocracy, 1870-2023. An Essay on Education and Equality*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Zemke, R. 1987. "Training in the 90's." *Training: The Magazine of Human Resource Development*, 24: 40-53.

Zoll, R., ed. 1988. *Zerstörung und Wiederaneignung von Zeit* (Destruction and Repossession of Time). Frankfurt A. M.: Suhrkamp.